DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 117 854 EA 007 930

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TITLE Censorship--Or For Whom the (School) Bell Tolls.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of School Administrators (108th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 20-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Censorship; Elementary Secondary Education; School Community Relationship; Superintendents; *Textbook Evaluation; *Textbook Selection

ABSTRACT

The speaker discusses the establishment of a district policy on the selection of books and the procedures that should be followed if a controversy develops. (IRT)

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Censorship - or For Whom the (School) Bell Tolls

Highlights from talk by David Weingast,
Superintendent of Schools, Ridgefield, Conn.

American Association of School Administrators,
Atlantic City, February 23, 1976

It would be nice to say we are dealing with a simple question, "to censor or not to censor". But as every superintendent knows this is, instead, a complex issue containing variables which are difficult, sometimes impossible to reconcile.

As school superintendents we are specifically concerned with our role in dealing with this nettlesome problem.

A superintendent's approach to the matter depends a great deal on the role he plays in his town.

Is he primarily an executor of Board policy?

Is he a passive conduit of judgments, some of which he knows to be wrong?

Is he mentor to the Board?

Is he molder of public opinion?

Is he conscience to the educational community?

Is he a bull in a China shop?

Before we talk about censorship we should talk about philosophy. Every school system needs such a declaration of aims and objectives to tell where it wants to go and how it hopes to get there. Without such a basic charter a

EA 007 930

school system is in a poor position to judge instructional materials or decide any policy matters. The philosophy should represent the best thinking of the Board, the staff and the community. While it is not realistic to expect unanimous agreement on a declaration of philosophy, the statement should nevertheless have the acquiescence if not support of the major publics in town. In the absence of such agreement Board and superintendent may be riding the Ship of Fools.

Every book in the school program should be there solely because it can make a bonafide contribution to education. Once this has been established other important criteria become applicable:

Is the book suitable for the age and maturity level of the reader?

Does it get high marks for authenticity? for scholarship?

Is it readable?

If the book is a partisan treatment is it balanced by other works that give xif significant alternative viewpoints?

There is no room in the book-selection process for impulse-buying, for mindless or capricious decisions, nor for the book that's intended to tittilate or shock.

Every schoolx system should have a systematic method of evaluating the books it wants to use. The process should be

spelled out in intelligible English for the whole town to see. Thus takes time to prepare and may slow down the process of book acquisition. But anything less might be risky in some towns and irresponsible in others.

The grade-placement of books calls for the trained judgment and discriminating taste of the professional staff. Not every student needs to know everything about everything. A book that can be rich in meaning for an eighteen-year-old high school senior might be grossly inappropriate for a sixth grader. To say no to the latter is not to exercise censorship but common sense.

Books should be judged in their entirety and not on the basis of isolated words or phrases. In the Roth-Alberts case the Supreme Court affirmed that in determining a book's literary value, the complete work must be considered and not just any paragraph taken out of context.

In deciding whether to acquire a book for classroom or school library there are some important considerations known to every teacher. Here are some that occur to me:

Does the book bring the reader closer to his fellow man?

Does it ennoble his spirit?

Does it help him to know himself?

Does it enlarge the realm of his experience?

Does it fire his imagination, or fuel his ambition to legitimate service to self or humanity?

Does it advance his knowledge about a significant human phenomenon, epoch or event?

Does it illuminate some part of an approved program of studies?

Are the author's characterizations faithful to the human experience?

Does the author write with skill and grace or, failing such attributes, does he tell a story that perhaps he alone is able to tell?

The impetus for banning a book often ~~xmxx~~ - not always - comes from a relatively small group. Their tones may be strident and therefore easily confus^ed with Vox Populi. These people are often labeled as latter-day Neanderthalers. But this can be a mistake. Some objectors may be truly outraged by a word or passage which does violence to deeply-held convictions. Their anguish may be focused on but a single page in a volume. Complicating the problem is the fact that some of these objectors may be among the nicest people in town.

But other complainants may be out to make mischief for the school or the library. A few may be using the offending title as an instrument of policy, looking beyond a particular book to "books". Their true aim may be to control the course of education.

When the issue erupts it is useful to invoke written procedures which are well known to the public. But these must have been worked out in advance. To start devising strategy after warfare has started may leave school people or librarians dangerously exposed.

Everybody in the public education business should be familiar with the form prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English on which complaints against a book may be recorded. This sheet can easily be adapted by any town in the country.

The people who support freedom to read should be on speaking terms . It should not take a community uproar for these people to get introduced to each other.

Do these various safeguards seem too elaborately detailed? too bothersome? too time consuming? Then you've never been caught in a book controversy. I measure my words when I say it can be hell.

Even with the best policies, on which there is general community agreement, there is no assurance that a book controversy won't blow up. But it is common sense and ordinary prudence to be prepared for this possibility. It does improve one's chances of survival.

If Superintendent and Board and staff, with reasonable public concurrence, have developed a working book-selection policy, then they should stand by their decisions.

To proscribe books in these circumstances is to walk away from duty and invite the deluge. The community itself may split apart. The most creative teachers, caught in deadly crossfire, may withdraw or just play it safe thereafter. Students will find new tedium in a school where banality may be exalted. Censorship exacts a high toll.

If our policies of book selection are rational, well

publicized and fair, there is no room for censorship. If in spite of this the censor's bell tolls, let there be no question. It tolls for thee, for me, but most of all for the children we teach.